

“They’re in Your Legs.”

Asma and Taylor

“They’re In Your Legs.”

[Most of Asma’s energy—nervous, excited, or otherwise—is connected to her family in some way. Whether it is the current concerns of a busy wife and mom or the more distant, yet crucially important, matter of her family back in Somalia, Asma is nearly constantly thinking about and working to help her family. This collection of selections from our conversations provides a sense of Asma’s incessant pursuit to support her family in Somalia.]

A: I’m always thinking. I don’t know. I don’t like the empty, empty brain.

T: Yeah?

A: I don’t like empty plan. I like always do something, in my mind, in my hands, my body, my actions... If I don’t have a plan, if I don’t have nothing to do, my husband say, “Why are you making tired yourself sometime? Just relax and live.” I say, “How I’m gonna relax and live?” [a kind of breathy chuckle in the middle of that sentence] Yeah...

[Asma’s need to be busy, her refusal to relax and live, is deeply rooted in the responsibility she feels towards her family.]

A: And also, coming to United States, if I have all my family, I may be, I may be better today.

T: Yeah.

A: Because, um... Because when I come to United States, everything was on my shoulder. Worrying about my life, worrying about the lov—the people I left. There’s a lot of responsibility.

T: Mhm.

A: So...That thing make me...Hold myself to give my, my chance, and my opportunity for someone else.

T: Yeah.

[fade]

A: Also, we send the money back home.

T: Back home?

A: That’s—that’s the thing to make us work hard to bring a lot of money home.

T: Mhm.

A: We have to be more... To get more income.

T: Mhm.

A: To...Feed them, our family here and *help* them, family back home, is...Being here, is very very very painful, but we thankful...we can have a job.

T: Yeah.

A: We thankful we are safe.

T: Yeah.

A: We thankful we can do our daily life normally.

T: Yeah?

A: That's the thing we thank, we thankful. But it's not easy.

T: Yeah.

A: Lifting your family there? They're in your legs. Like that.

T: Yeah. They're in your legs. They're holding on.

A: They're in your legs. Always. Always.

T: Yeah?

A: Yeah. Yeah. Whether you are youngest one, whether you are oldest one. Being out, they always with you. Unless you ignore them. And not most, most people are—most, most, ...the people on my, on my country, they don't ignore their family.

T: They don't ignore.

A: Yeah. They—they know what is back home, is it. Yeah.

[Asma clearly does not ignore her family. However, she feels more responsibility towards her youngest sister and her mother. Her middle sisters, who are married and living busy lives of their own, don't need as much support.]

A: My sisters, I talk with them sometime.

T: Yeah.

A: But we don't have, eh, a lot of, uh...call phones.

T: Mhm.

A: Maybe we check up every two, three months, sometimes.

T: Mhm.

A: Yeah, we don't talk a lot, they just busy, they have, and they live in the far, for the Mogadishu.

T: Mhm.

A: Two, they living in Afgoooye.

T: Oh, two are in Afgoooye.

A: Yeah. Mm.

T: With families, right? Those are the ones with families, right?

A: Yeah, they have kids, yeah. They have families. And the, and the last one, I told you, we are so close, the last one. Because she finish the college in eh, Khartoum?

T: Mhm.

A: She finish the college in Khartoum, and that one is, is close to me.

T: Yeah?

A: Yeah. The youngest one is close to me. And my mom. Yeah. [sadly] The others we just checking up. “How you doing? How is everything?” Like that. And when I have a new baby, they call me to get-congratulate me.

T: Yeah.

A: And just to talk to me little bit. But they’re fine.

T: They’re fine?

A: They’re fine, they’re busy for their own houses. They’re not have a lot of money, and not a lot of, enough everything, but they raising the kids. And their husband is with them. Yeah. That’s why I’m not worried about, because they have husbands?

T: Mmm.

A: So, but I worry about my youngest one and my mom, a lot.

[This worry began in Syria, when teenaged Asma spent a great deal of time praying. This worry, however, was one she could actively reduce by sending money home and working on her mother’s refugee application. This worry solidified into commitment and resolve to her purpose when she arrived in the United States.]

A: Yeah. It was very, very hard. I used to pray a lot. I used to pray in the middle of night, three o’clock, two o’clock, and I *pray*, and I ask God, like, “God, please don’t let me here, don’t let me here. I cannot find a great job to support myself. [baby Halima cooing] My mom and my sisters are there. I’m the only one who, who be, be the helper. Please don’t put me down.... I mean... give me a better life.” And He give it to me. And I change my family life, I change it, I totally change it—I mean, until now, I send the bill for my mom.

T: Yeah.

A: Until now, I...the reason my, my younger one graduated is for me. If-If I’m not supporting her, she never find that college. She find the scholarship, but she will never handle it because each month I used to send her \$400—

T: Yeah.

A: —And that’s not easy—for her *living* only.

T: Yeah.

[Asma's youngest sister was the first member of their family to graduate from college. Pride resonates in Asma's voice as she describes how she paid her sister's way through school.]

A: The only sister I have much connection...

T: Yeah.

A: The youngest one.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah, the youngest one, and my mom.

T: Yeah.

A: Because... the youngest one doesn't have a husband...

T: Mm.

A: Doesn't have a kids...

T: Mm.

A: So I, I don't have—She's, she's nothing make her busy.

T: Right.

A: So she always to be focused, she wanna study, she wanna be a good student, she have a dream... like when you see that person have a dream, you need to someone help...

T: Yeah.

[In fact, paying for her sister's eight years of medical school was one of the motivations for her eventual move to Ohio.]

A: They say, "Anyone who wanna take, eh, unemployment because we are losing a lot of money."

T: Yeah.

A: "So we are free to give them...Until you getting another job."

T: Mhm.

A: So, it was not must-do. Is just a choice.

T: Yeah.

A: And I say yes, and I take it because unemployment, you're gonna receive some money.

T: Yeah.

A: But less than your check, less than your check, but not zero.

T: Yeah.

A: And you can go anywhere you wanted and you're still receiving that money.

T: Right.

A: And then, and then—The reason I wanted unemployment for me, for myself and for my sister, who arrive in *new*, freshman college in, in in Sudan.

T: Yeah.

A: And I say, "I have to pay the bill." So and, the second reason, I wanna *go* there [to Ohio], so this is the right time I can go there.

[Helping her sister through school compelled Asma to set aside her own dreams for a while, but that decision—that sacrifice—also empowered her.]

A: I even... The time I want to go back to college, and....and do something for myself, I give up for myself, I give my, my sister.

T: Mhm

A: [clears throat] Because I'm in the country have a lot of opportunity, [baby Halima babbling] I can go to college anytime, but my sister, she's only have one chance, and that chance she gets a scholarship, she only has one use, and by the way that time, she's gonna lose it.

T: Mmm.

A: And it's too expensive to pay, uh back home school, because there's no government to pay. Nothing you [??] in government, and at least you have a scholarship, you have to use it right away, if you don't use it in a few years, it's gone, there's nothing for you.

T: Mhm.

A: So I give her a chance to finish the school, because I'm the only one who support my, my sister. And I am so happy, she graduated after eight years.

[If her sister's journey has been a source of pride, then Asma's mother's journey—which is still ongoing—to the United States has been a source of frustration and dogged persistence. This commitment, though, is unwavering, as Asma seeks to give her mother the life she believes she deserves.]

T: Do they, do they still live together?

A: Y—right now, now. My mom is in Uganda right now.

T: Right. And your sister is in... Sudan, right?

A: Yes. No, my sister is in Somalia. She's back.

T: She's back in Somalia. She went to med school in Sudan?

A: Yeah, she graduate in [date], whole process, whole process my mom finishes in Sudan.

T: Okay.

A: Whole process, my mom finish in Sudan.

T: Okay.

A: While she was staying with her sister.

T: Okay.

A: So, after my sister—when I, when I filled the application, for my mom, my sister, she was new in the program.

T: Okay.

A: She just started. So, after my, um, my sister graduate, my mom and my sister decided—my sister graduates. She have to, she did one year for internship.

T: Mhm.

A: She have to go back to Somalia, so she have to work, practice what she learned, so in, in the end of [date], my sister decided to go back, so she finish her internship.

T: Oh, okay.

A: So my mom, she say, “My sister leaving me, your-your...my daughter leave, she wanna leaving for Somalia, so what am I supposed to do here?”

T: Yeah.

A: I say, “Mommy, I don’t know what I do, but I am trying to bring you here.” And she say, “Okay, let me know if they say something. But I have to go.” [laughs] But I tried...I tried to...save some money to...for the ticket, for both of them, and my husband helped me.

T: Yeah.

A: So we sent them to Somalia, so after I send them to Somalia, I have an idea. Why my mom, she not trying Uganda or Kenya, because the process is easy for the Kenya and Uganda, for the...

T: Okay.

A: Yeah, so in Sudan, my lawyer told me, in Sudan... I forget her name—[name]?

T: Mhm.

A: [name] told me that Sudan is not much... A lot of people there.

T: Okay.

A: So before she gave me some advice: why don't take your mom to another country? And I say, "Her daughter, she cannot leave her daughter there."

T: Yeah.

A: So, when my mom and my, um my sister go back to Somalia, I say to them, "I have an idea. Why don't my mom, she don't go to Uganda or Kenya or South Africa to follow the process?"

T: Okay.

A: Because—I was having a hope.

T: Yeah.

A: Maybe, one day, if I follow every time...

T: Right.

A: I will never give up. I will *never* give up. But that time my mom her hope is, is, she was becoming hope-hope-hopeless.

T: Yeah. So she's, okay, so she's in Uganda.

A: Mhm.

T: But is she still a refugee from Somalia? Do you know what I mean? Or is the case through Uganda?

A: No. No. She went to Uganda in this year.

T: Okay.

A: And she fill *all* the application for refugee.

T: Okay.

A: And they give her her paper.

T: Okay.

A: Yes. They give her the paper, but the process, *I* send it. The process is gonna stay there. I transferred it to Sudan, to Uganda, so it is just application for [??] it can go anywhere, they can see anywhere...

T: Okay, so it doesn't matter where she's coming from, it's just the office in Kenya, it's gonna be easier for an American person to come there and do the interviews...

A: Yeah.

T: Okay, okay.

A: So, um, it's important to be a refugee in the country she is.

T: Okay, so is she technically a Ugandan refugee right now? [tapping table with pen]

A: Right now, yes.

T: Okay.

A: She take the paper, she went to there, she say, “That’s my story, I have a case, this is my case, my daughter is there, and is different case because—the case I came to the United States, it was application I put it there, but the case she’s coming is uh...I am offering to bring my mom here.

T: Right.

A: It’s a little bit different.

T: It’s different, yeah.

A: So, she... My case, my case it can go anywhere, any country you wanted, as long as the case process is going.

T: Yeah.

A: So but my case, the one I come to United States, it was only—if I left Syria, everything is gone.

T: Okay, right.

A: So nobody removed it everywhere.

T: Okay.

A: So I had to stay there until I get ‘yes’ or ‘no.’”

T: Okay.

[fade]

A: Since [date], I did not have any news.

T: Okay.

A: And my sister, she’s a doctor now, she work one of the hospitals in Mogadishu.

T: Mhm.

A: And she...

T: So she wanted to stay there? [A nods] Yeah?

A: I mean, she wanted to stay there, but she was trying to get um, some scholarship to try to finish her degree, she wanted, she wanted...

T: Oh, so she’s got more?

A: She’s a bachelor now, she want a, maybe do PhD something like...She wants to do more, she never gets tired of going to school, she says, “I love it!”

[And so Asma will continue to support her sister's pursuits in Somalia, while simultaneously fighting for her mother's chance to come to the United States. This fight, however, is not easy. And it has been going on for a long time.]

A: I'm wishing every year my mom come.

T: Yeah.

A: Every year, I say, "This year she will come. This year she will come."

T: What about this year?

A: [sighs] This year is most worst.

T: Yeah?

A: Is most worst. Everything's slow.

T: Yeah?

A: They even shut down some of, ah, couple agents for the processing for the families?

T: Really?

A: Yeah, they shut it down. In Ohio. Only CRIS is open I think.

T: Wow.

A: And very slow. Very slow.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. Very slow. But by the lucky, my mom she finished whole her process.

T: She's almost done.

A: Yeah, she's almost done. Unless... They, they have to examine her. Like a checkup? Medicals? Something? Yeah that's the only left. And the visa. To let them, give them visa. Yeah. [mumbles, absentmindedly] That's all I think...

[fade]

A: Yeah. My lucky day when my mom come here. My kids will have a grandma. They don't know a grandma unless you call them on the phone.

T: Yeah.

[fade]

A: Yeah, I always wanted her now. But when I come to United States, it was [date]...end of [date], so at that time, our president was [name] right?

T: Mhm.

A: Yeah, President [name]. So they changed the system...for the...They changed the system for the pr-process for the refugees...

T: Mhm.

A: Because there's a lot of people failed, uh, for the DNA?

T: Mhm.

A So as soon I come to the United States, I filled the application for my family—my sisters, my mom, everybody!

T: Yeah.

A: I filled it. And then they say, "Okay. Now this application is close. Because there are a lot of people the DNA failed, so the process is closed. Just you can fill application for your husband or your, your wife.

T: Wow.

A: I wait. I wait. I used to check every year. When I was in Kentucky I used to check, when I came here—

T: To see if the rule changed?

A: Yeah, I used to check. Until my, my, my sister become twenty years old.

T: Yeah.

A: Then they open, they reopen [date]. As soon they—as *soon* they open [date], and the process for the families, I started.

T: Yeah.

A: They opened in November?

T: Yeah.

A: [date]. And [date, following year], January, I, I completely finish every paper for my mom, everything.

T: Yeah. For your mom? Just your mom?

A: Just my mom. Because my sister, she become twenty-one at that time.

T: Oh, okay.

A: And they say, "If you want your sister, they gonna be separated because she's not anymore a kids."

T: Mm.

A: So yeah, the process is like that.

T: Oh, okay. Your family couldn't go together. It could only be one person at a time.

A: Yeah.

T: Okay.

A: The last one, she turn twenty-one.

T: Yeah?

A: I say, "Okay. There's not more chance, for..."

T: Yeah.

A: I need just my mom.

T: Yeah.

A: And I filled the application and everything was okay. But the first they told me, "Can you move your mom another country? Because, um, Sudan we don't have a lot of connection."

T: Mhm.

A: And I ask Mama, I ask Mommy, I say, "Can I take you Ethiopia or Uganda or South Africa or somewhere else?" And my mom say, "No, your sister need help."

T: Mmm.

A: "Your sister need help. She struggling with medical school, when she come back home, she need someone to home."

T: Yeah.

A: "And this is important to get educated. I mean, you there now, you working in warehouse, you not educated, and you lost going to college, now I don't want your sister lost, too."

T: Yeah.

A: And I say, "Okay, Mom, whatever you like it. I'm gonna make the papers there, we gonna see." Yeah. And then I keep continue doing the, eh, Sudan until my sister graduate, and I'm waiting now, I think [number] years until now. [pause, tsks] I wasn't expecting like this.

T: Yeah?

A: When I filled application for my mom, I was single, I was not married.

T: Mm.

A: Yeah. And then [date] December, I get married.

T: Yeah.

A: Yeah. [pause]

T: Everything has changed...

A: *Everything* has changed.

T: ...Since you started that application.

A: Yeah, everything has changed. I—I become [date], um, May, citizen.

T: You were a citizen. Yeah.

A: I think May or April, I don't remember, maybe March? I don't remember. [laughs]

[Everything has changed since Asma helped her mother open that application to come to the United States. She has held multiple jobs, moved across the country twice, met her husband, started a family, and finally started college. All without her mother. So, while supporting her family is a source of empowerment for Asma, it has also caused a great deal of worry and pain.]